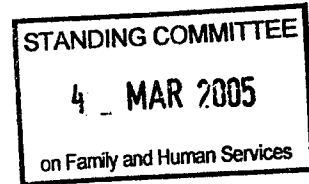


3 March 2005.



Mrs Bronwyn Bishop, MP,  
Chair, Family and Human Services Committee,  
Commonwealth Parliamentary Inquiry into Balancing Work and Family,  
Email [fhs.reps@aph.gov.au](mailto:fhs.reps@aph.gov.au)

Dear Ma'am,

Thank you for your invitation to provide a submission to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Inquiry into Balancing Work and Family. The issues I would like to draw to your attention are as follows:

**1. The financial, career and social disincentives to starting families**

People often delay having children, or choose to remain childless today for a number of reasons. Most importantly, children are not valued in our society. People are more likely to perceive having children as negatively impacting on their career progression, income earning capacities and ability to participate in social activities than they are to see the benefits to themselves (and society). The under-valuing of children is reflected in policies and services. Children are still seen as the primary responsibility of their parents so the state does not see a major role for itself in providing support and services. The recent focus on supporting families is the first very small step on a path that has the potential to change this perception. However, we still spend more money on military armaments than we spend on supporting our young children and families (see the early years research for information on the cost to our society in the long term of this perspective<sup>1</sup>). Until this changes, many people will continue to believe that having children is too hard a challenge because

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<sup>1</sup> Sims, M (2002) *Designing family support programmes. Building children, family and community resilience*. Altona, Vic: Common Ground Press. Available [www.theLearner.com](http://www.theLearner.com)

they have to meet it alone (within their nuclear family) without feeling confident they can access the support they need.

## **2. Making it easier for parents who so wish to return to the paid workforce**

As long as we continue to support the belief that parents are the best (and should be the only) people to rear their children we will continue to coerce families to choose to remain at home with their children and not participate in employment or other aspects of public life. If we believe that today's children will be tomorrow's leaders and citizens, it is easier to see that the state does have a responsibility to ensure that all children have the best possible child rearing experiences<sup>2</sup>. We need to:

- develop in public education campaigns to encourage everyone to take responsibility for our communities' children. As long as people think that parents who are not caring for their children themselves are selfish it will always be difficult for parents to engage in public life.
- develop more children friendly services and communities. For example special spaces need to be developed for children in meeting rooms and other community buildings so parents can participate in activities taking place there (a community consultation for example, is not effective unless some form of space and resources are provided for children – if this is not done many parents can not attend so their views are not heard). Consideration needs to be given to the needs of parents and children in any community event. Children are an integral part of our community and their needs ought to be addressed in all community activities, events and places.
- Offer support to ALL families with young children so that parents have the mental, physical, emotional and financial resources to offer their children the best possible home environment. These include programmes offering peer support, home visiting, playgroups, access to parenting information and resources, access to resources (such as toy libraries, book libraries, safe outdoor play spaces), appropriate financial support, community development programmes etc.
- Offer high quality services that share parenting responsibilities so that parents are able to re-enter the workforce, or engage in public life of some kind. These include high quality child care places of various kinds, as well as workplace reforms such as flexible working hours that really work, appropriate transport options so people can take advantage of these, etc.

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<sup>2</sup> The evidence from research indicates that a focus on the early years is also sound in long term economic gains. The latest from the Perry Preschool Project, for example, shows, 40 years later, a saving of \$17 for every \$1 spent on preschool intervention for young children at risk (see [www.highscope.org/Research/PerryProject/Perry-SRCD-2003.pdf](http://www.highscope.org/Research/PerryProject/Perry-SRCD-2003.pdf)).

### 3. The impact of taxation and other matters on families in the choices they make in balancing work and family life

In the child care industry we are seeing an increasing number of families using child care part-time because the costs of returning to work full-time are too great. Many families find that much of the income from one adult goes into child care fees. Full-time work for both parents thus brings a huge amount of additional stress (associated particularly with time pressures), with little financial gain. Many choose for one adult to work part-time (in order to keep skills current and to have a life outside of the home) and accept that they will gain very little (or no) financial benefit from this. However, the benefits in terms of keeping employment options open and skills current is seen by many as desirable.

Nearly 70% of children using child care do so for less than three days a week<sup>3</sup>. This means that in a child care centre with 30 FTE places, nearly 100 families are registered and attending each week, making developing relationships with families and children, and designing programmes to meet the needs of each individual child and family a difficult task for caregivers.

Child care costs are thus limiting families' willingness to have both adults participate in full-time employment. Resultant part-time patterns of usage are challenging the child care industry to deliver quality programmes. Tax incentives that provide an annual refund do not help families throughout the year and are thus unlikely to address these issues.

We need to increase financial support for quality child care. It is to the state's ultimate benefit that children receive high quality care (clear research evidence links low quality care to social, behavioural and emotional problems<sup>4</sup>) thus it should be the state's responsibility to provide the necessary support to ensure that children receive that care, irrespective of the location of care in the home or a centre. If we truly believe that children are important, and that quality experiences in the early years (both in and outside the home) make a difference, then we need to develop services that will support quality in all these settings. Only when parents are able to access quality services for their children will they be willing and able to participate more freely in employment.

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<sup>3</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2003). *Child Care 2002. State Tables*. (Catalogue Number 4402.0 ed.). Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia

<sup>4</sup> for example Dettling, A., Parker, S., Sebanc, L., & Gunnar, M. (2000). Quality of care and temperament determine changes in cortisol concentrations over the day for young children in child care. *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, 25(8), 819 – 836

National Institute on Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network. (2003b). Social functioning in first grade: associations with earlier home and child care predictors and with current classroom experiences. *Child Development*, 74(6), 1639 - 1662

Watamura, S., Donzella, B., Alwin, J., & Gunnar, M. (2003). Morning-to-afternoon increases in cortisol concentrations for infants and toddlers at child care age differences and behavioural correlates. *Child Development*, 74(4), 1006 - 1020

I am willing to provide further information if required and can be contacted through the addresses below. Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission.

Yours sincerely,

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